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# News Release



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## **U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE** **PROPOSES CRITICAL HABITAT FOR SAN JACINTO VALLEY CROWNSCALE**

### **Proposal Acknowledges Conservation Benefits of Western Riverside Habitat Conservation Plan**

Complying with a court order to determine whether critical habitat should be designated for the federally endangered *Atriplex coronata* var. *notatior* (San Jacinto Valley crownscale), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded that the Western Riverside Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan already provides sufficient conservation benefits for this plant.

As part of the process of establishing a Habitat Conservation Plan, the Service assures landowners, communities, and counties that in return for voluntarily adopting the HCP they will be relieved of the additional regulatory burden that critical habitat might impose.

As a result, the Service today proposed not to designate any land as critical habitat for the San Jacinto Valley crownscale – a native plant found only in portions of western Riverside County, California – but is seeking comment on its proposal to exclude these areas from a critical habitat designation.

San Jacinto Valley crownscale occurs within seasonal wetlands, including vernal pools and flood plains, in highly alkaline or silty-clay soils. Major population clusters of the plant have been identified in the floodplain of the San Jacinto River at the San Jacinto Wildlife Area and between the Ramona Expressway and Railroad Canyon Reservoir; in the Upper Salt Creek vernal pool complex in the western Hemet area; and in the floodplain of Alberhill Creek north of Lake Elsinore.

All of the known essential habitat areas for San Jacinto Valley crownscale are within the boundaries of the Western Riverside Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan. The Western Riverside plan commits to the conservation of San Jacinto Valley crownscale and its habitat, including the hydrology necessary to support the species. After reviewing the conservation benefits the Western Riverside plan provides to the plant, the Service has determined it is appropriate to exclude these areas in their entirety from proposed critical habitat.

“The Service supports regional habitat conservation planning efforts because they provide real benefits to species in terms of management and protection.” said Steve Thompson, Manager of the Service’s California/Nevada Operations Office. “Input received from stakeholders, partners, and the

public will be used by the Service in weighing the benefits of including or excluding these lands as critical habitat. Although the Service is excluding all land from being proposed as critical habitat for San Jacinto Valley crownscale, this proposed designation still meets the requirements of the Act.”

To ensure the public is provided with an opportunity to review and comment on the proposal, the Service is opening a 60-day comment period. Comments and information on the proposed rule will be accepted until 5 p.m. on December 6, 2004, after which a final rule will be prepared.

Comments and materials can be submitted in writing to the Field Supervisor, Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office, 6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad, California 92009, or by facsimile at 760/431-9681. The public can also comment by electronic mail (e-mail) to **fw1cfwo\_sjvc@fws.gov**.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.

This critical habitat proposal was completed in response to a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and California Native Plant Society.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service’s Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife management areas.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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